

[Pack on my back]

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Hilda [Polacheck.?)

American Folk Stuff.

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Pack on my Back.

How did I happen to become a peddler? When I came to Chicago in [1870?], there was nothing else to do. I was eighteen years old[;?] I had learned no trade in Russia. The easiest thing to do was to peddle.

(Here was a promising start to a tale of frontier commerce by a true old timer. His story grew out of a conversation about the present day refugee problem.)

People coming to [America?] today have a much harder time. There are better houses to live in and nearly everybody has a bath-tub, but there are no jobs. It is not easy to make a living. In the old days, if you had a few dollars, you could buy some dry-goods and peddle. But today you must know a trade or have a profession, otherwise you have no chance.

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I went to live with an aunt and uncle when I first came to Chicago. They lived in a small four room house on Fourth Avenue. (Federal Street today) They had four children but they managed to rent one room to two roomers. I shared the bed with these two men.

The day after I got to Chicago my uncle asked me if I had any money. I told him I had ten dollars. He told me to invest it in dry goods and start peddling. I peddled in Chicago till after the fire of 1871. There were not [mny] stores, so I had no trouble selling my goods. I used to make from six to ten dollars a week. I paid my aunt three dollrs a week for my food and lodging and the rest [I?] saved. I had the responsibility 2 of bringing my father, two sisters and two brothers to [America?].

It was the great fire of 1871 that made me a country peddler. Oh, yes! I remember the fire very well. It was in October. We used to go to bed early, because the two roomers had to go to work very early. We were getting ready to go to bed, when we heard the fire bells ringing. I asked the two men if they wanted to see where the fire was.

"Why should I care where the fire is," one of the men said. "As long as our house is not on fire, I don't care what house is burning. There is a fire every Monday and Thursday in Chicago."

But I wanted to see the fire. So I went out into the street. I saw the flames across the river. But I thought that since the river was between the fire and our house, there was nothing to worry about. I went into the house and went to bed.

The next thing I knew my two bed-fellows were shaking me. "Get up," they cried. "The whole city is on fire! Save your things! We are going to Lincoln Park."

I jumped out of bed and pulled on my pants. Everybody in the house was trying to save as much as possible. I tied my clothes in a sheet. With my clothes under my arm and my pack on my back, I left the house with the rest of the family. Everybody was running north. People were carrying all kinds of crazy things. A woman was carrying a pot of soup, which

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was 3 spilling all over her dress. People were carrying cats, dogs and goats. In the great excitement people saved worthless things and left behind good things. I saw a woman carrying a big frame in which was framed her wedding veil and wreath. She said it would have been bad luck to leave it behind.

When we came to Lake Street I saw all the wagons of Marshall Field and Company lined up in front of their place of business. (The firm was then called Field, [leiter?] and Company) Man and boys were carrying the goods out of the building and loading everything into the wagons. The merchandise was taken to the street-car barns on State near Twentieth Street. I am sure that Marshall Field must have been one of the owners of the street-car company. Otherwise why would the street-car people have allowed him to bring his goods there. A couple of weeks later[, ?] Marshall Field started doing business in the car-barns. I remember buying some goods there.

No one slept that night. People gathered on the streets and all kinds of reasons were given for the fire. I stood near a minister. He was talking to a group of men. He said the fire was sent by God as a warning that the people were wicked. He said there were too many saloons in Chicago. There were too many houses of prostitution. A woman who heard this said that since the fire started in a barn it was a direct warning from God. She said Jesus was also born in a barn. I talked to a man who lived next door to Mrs. O'Leary, and he 4 told me that the fire started in Mrs. O'Leary's barn. She went out to milk the cow when it was beginning to get dark. She took a lamp with her and the cow kicked the lamp over and that's how the fire started. There were all kinds of songs made up about the fire. Years after the fire, people were still singing songs about it. You remember the song "Hot Time in the Old Town," well there was a song made up to that tune. These are the words: "One moonlight night while the families were in bed, Mrs. O'Leary took a lantern to the shed, The cow kicked it over winked her eye and said: There'll be a hot time in the old town tonight, my baby."

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As many of the hopes were burned, many people left the city. Some went to live with relatives in other cities. A great many men became country peddlers. There were thousands of men walking from farm to farm with heavy packs on their backs. These peddlers [carried?] all kinds of merchandise. Things that they thought the farmers and their families could use.

There was no rural mail delivery in those days. The farmers very seldom saw a newspaper. They were hungry for news. They were very glad to see a peddler from any large city. They wanted to hear all about the great fire. Then I told a farmer that I was from Chicago, he was very glad to see me. You see, I was a newspaper and a department store.

The farms were ten, fifteen, twenty, and even thirty miles apart. It would take a day sometime to walk from one farm to the next one. I used to meet peddlers from all over. It was not an easy life. But we made pretty good money. Most of the men had come from Europe and had left their families behind. We were all trying to save enough money to bring relatives to America.

The living expenses of the peddlers were very little. The farmers' wives always gave us plenty of food. I did not eat anything that was not kosher. But I could eat eggs and there were plenty of them. There was fresh milk and bread and butter. The farmers always gave us a place to sleep. In the summer we slept in the hay-loft. In the winter, if there was no spare bed, we would sleep on the floor. When the farmer had no extra blankets, we slept with our clothes on to keep warm.

I had a customer in Iowa. I used to get to his farm once a year. He had a nice six room house, and it was one of the few places where I could have a bed to sleep in. When I got to the place after a year's absence, there was no house. The ground was covered with snow, and I could not even see the place where the house had been. As I was looking

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around, thinking that I was lost, my good friend the farmer came out of a dug-out. I asked him what had happened to his house.

“Oh, we had a terrible storm about four months ago, and the house blew away,” said the farmer. “We are living in this dug-out now; it isn't as nice as the house was, but it's safe and warm. Come on in.”

I had never been in a dug-out and I was surprised to see how nice the farmer and his wife had fixed up this hole in the ground. There were seven people living in this dug-out, but they made room for me.

The farmers were very lonely during the long winters, and they were glad to have anybody come to their homes. Very often they were cheated by crooks that travelled about the country. The farmers called them city slickers.

I remember the story of one of those slickers. You see, I never worked on Saturday, which was my Sabbath, and I never worked on Sunday which was the farmer's Sabbath. You see, I had a five day week long before the unions started asking for it. I was spending Saturday with a farmer, and I was sitting on the back porch in the afternoon, when a horse and buggy drove into the yard. Two men got out of the buggy and walked into the kitchen. No one knocked on doors those days. There were no door-bells. One man was well dressed and the other one looked like a hired man. The man with the good clothes, said that he was “Doctor O'Brien”, and the other one was his driver. The “doctor” wanted to know if he and his driver could get some dinner. He said he could pay any price. The “doctor” wanted fried spring chicken.

Well, we had finished our dinner. But the farmer's wife said she would fix dinner for them. She went out to the yard and caught two fine [spring?] chickens. She dressed them and soon they were frying. While the good woman was fixing some potatoes, the “doctor” went out into the yard. As soon as he was out of the kitchen, the driver told the woman

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that she should be careful when the “doctor” paid for the dinner, because he had a lot of counterfeit money.

Well, the woman put the dinner on the table. The driver the called the “doctor” and those two men sat down and ate everything on the table. I never saw anybody eat so much. After they each had three cups of coffee, the “doctor” took out a big wallet and gave the woman a ten-dollar bill and asked for the change.

The woman thought the money was counterfeit, so she said she had no change. The “doctor” was very sorry, but he said he was driving to town and he would leave the money in the post office. The men left. Of course there was no money left at the post office.

For months after that, every farm I came to, I heard the story of “Doctor O'Brein” and his driver. A farmer who had heard the story had the “doctor” arrested for carrying counterfeit money. But all his money was good. That was just a [?] trick to get free meals.

After carrying the pack on my back for two years[,?] I decided to buy a horse and wagon. Many other peddlers got the same idea. I used to meet the small covered wagons as they drove about the country.

I had now been peddling for five years and had saved enough money to bring my father, brothers and sisters to America. They came to Chicago. By that time a great many 8 new houses had been built and we rented a four room house on Maxwell Street. My oldest brother started peddling. One of my sisters started working in a clothing factory, while the other one kept house.

After my father had been in Chicago a few months, he [was?] wanted to go to Burlington, Iowa to see a friend who had been his neighbor in Russia. When he got there, he met this friend's daughter and decided that I ought to marry her. So I went to Burlington, met the girl, and I agreed with my father. The young lady and I were married in 1875. I rented a small house near my father's home and we furnished it. I believe we had the first rug in the

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neighborhood. We were very proud of our first American home. It was the begining of a good life. I stayed home for a week with my young wife. It was my first vacation since I had come to America. Then I started off again in my wagon.

Several years after we were married the house next door to ours burned down. My wife, who was a very good housekeeper, took the family into our home. The husband was peddling in the country and he did not know about it. So when he came home, he could not find his family. Finally some of the neighbors told him where his wife and children were. He came to our house and made himself at home. But he told my wife later that he did not like it at our house because it was too clean. He could not spit on the floor.

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Many of the men who carried packs on their backs and in covered wagons, became very rich. They learned American business ways. Some of them opened small stores which their wives looked after while the men were on the road. Then the stores showed a good profit, they would quit peddling. Some of the largest department stores in the country were started by men who peddled with packs on their backs.

I never got rich. My wife and I raised six children. When my sisters and brothers got married, my father came to live with us. Then one of my sisters died and her children came to live with us. Then my wife brought her parents to America and they lived with us. Then we wanted our children to have an education, so we sent them to college. There never was enough money left to start any kind of business. But I feel that we made a good investment.

During the fifty years that I peddled, I always went home for all the Jewish holidays and when a baby was born. I would stay home a week and then was off again in my wagon.

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Yes, the peddlers with their packs did their share to make life more comfortable for the farmers, while they were ploughing the ground and raising food for America.